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ABSTRACT

This publication provides local governments in New York with guidelines and suggestions for three major records management undertakings: (1) writing an ordinance, resolution, or local law to establish a records management program; (2) defining the role of the Records Management Officer in developing, organizing, and directing a records management program; and (3) appointing a Records Advisory Board to assist in establishing and supporting a records management program. A records management program oversees recorded information from its creation to final disposition. Components include systematic disposal of obsolete records, development of filing systems, and microfilming of selected records for efficiency and preservation. Such programs provide a number of advantages to local governments, particularly in cost effectiveness. Ways in which local programs must blend with state requirements are described. (SLD)

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Fundamentals of Establishing a Records Management Program

Local Government Records Technical Information Series

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(replaces Basic Records Management for Local Government, Nos. 1-3)

Local Government Records Technical Information Series

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The University of the State of New York
The State Education Department
State Archives and Records Administration
Local Government Records Services
Albany, New York 12230

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Fundamentals of Establishing a Records Management Program

Local Government Records Technical Information Series No. 1

Introduction

This publication supersedes #1 - "Records Legislation for Local Governments," #2 - "The Records Management Officer in Local Government," and #3 - "The Records Advisory Board in Local Government." It provides local governments with guidelines and suggestions for three major records management undertakings:

- writing an ordinance, resolution, or local law to establish a records management program
- defining the role of the Records Management Officer (RMO) in developing, organizing, and directing a records management program
- appointing a Records Advisory Board to assist in establishing and supporting a records management program

A records management program oversees recorded information from its creation to final disposition. Program components include systematic disposal of obsolete records, development of filing systems, and microfilming of selected records for better security, accessibility, space savings, and preservation. Cost-effective inactive records storage, identification and preservation of archival records, and sound management of electronic records round out the program.

Local Government Records Law, Article 57-A, states that a local "government body shall promote and support a program for the orderly and efficient management of records." Such programs provide several advantages for local government. They save government resources and taxpayers' money. They ensure systematic arrangement of files leading to quick access and retrieval, thus minimizing costly staff time. The programs lead to better use of space, identification of records having administrative, legal, and fiscal importance, and preservation and systematic management of records with permanent value.

Records Management Legislation for Local Governments

Purpose of Records Management Legislation

Local legislation (or formal executive directives where no legislative body exists) is essential to effectively organize and operate a records management program and can provide governments with many benefits:

- It encourages development of a sound program. The strongest operations in New York State and nationwide are based on ordinances, resolutions, or local laws, indicating that a records management program is a necessary government function.
- It ensures that records management is an ongoing program, not a temporary reaction to records problems. Enacting legislation establishes the government's lasting commitment to the program and enhances the program's credibility.
- It provides a legal basis for actions pertaining to records and a clear definition of who is responsible for the various aspects of the records management program.
- It demonstrates to all local government employees and to the general public the government's commitment to, as well as the importance and legal basis of, the records management program.

Writing Local Government Records Legislation

No prescribed format or uniform content exists for records ordinances, but the legislation written by local governments should be clear and sufficiently detailed for the purposes it intends to accomplish. Local governments will need to consult with their counsels throughout the process of drafting the records legislation. The staff of the State Archives and Records Administration (SARA) Local Government Records Services can provide advice about the elements that should be included in the legislation. They can also provide examples of records legislation developed by local governments in New York.

Recommended Components of Records Legislation

To provide a clear understanding of legislative intent and program content, include the following in any records legislation:

Program Statement/Objectives. Outline the initial step of establishment of the records management program, and affirm the program as a continuing administrative function of government. Add that all

government employees should help attain the program's objectives:

- creation of accurate, complete, and necessary records
- cost-effective administration of information resources
- quick access to and retrieval of records
- legal disposition of obsolete records
- permanent retention and protection of archival records

Program Responsibility. Clarify the administrative placement of the program and specify those who will be responsible for its operation. List what positions are responsible for what tasks and who is accountable to whom in carrying them out.

Key Program Components. Define major program concerns, including records, records retention and disposition schedules, the Records Management Officer, the Records Advisory Board, administration and use of archival records, and the essential elements of a program. These elements may include: survey of existing records, needs analysis, assessment and use of modern technology applications, management of inactive records, disposition of obsolete records, establishment of an archives, and development of policies and procedures. They should be compatible with definitions in the Arts and Cultural Affairs Law and the Regulations of the Commissioner of Education.

Some records are not regulated by the Commissioner of Education and will not be found in the SARA Records Retention and Disposition Schedules. Examples are ***court records, motor vehicle records, and records of the City of New York.*** *For further examples, as well as relevant addresses and phone numbers, see* "Using Records Retention and Disposition Schedules," *SARA Local Government Records Technical Information Series #41.*

Records Management Officer. Define the responsibilities of the local government's Records Management Officer. Delegate authority to the position and place the RMO in the local government hierarchy. Placing the Records Management Officer administratively near the official with the most authority encourages compliance with records management policies. **Note: Section 57.19 of the Local Government Records Law requires most local governments to have a Records Management Officer and outlines the responsibilities.**

Records Advisory Board. Provide for the creation of the Records Advisory Board and describe its role in a records management program. The Board's support is crucial in the initial stages of the program, and the advice it gives the local government can influence the program's degree of success.

Records Management Plan. Planning enables managers to establish direction and control and to promote understanding of the program's purpose. Authorization of short- and long-term plans will allow the records management program to develop and operate.

Records Disposition Approval Process. Indicate which local government official(s) must provide approval before records are destroyed. In addition, SARA strongly recommends that a list of records destroyed be retained permanently (for example, by inclusion in the minutes of the governing body).

The Records Management Officer

Purpose of Having a Records Management Officer

To organize and operate a records management program effectively, one person must be in charge because:

- A successful records management program requires continued attention. The Records Management Officer provides that focused attention and expertise and oversees the development of standard procedures for such activities as handling records, retrieving information, and preserving archival records.
- Officials throughout the local government recognize the Records Management Officer as the official primarily responsible for the records management program. They rely on this person's expertise, thus leading to more efficient and economical operations.
- The Records Management Officer provides government officials with continual expert advice on the disposition of obsolete records, the identification and preservation of archival records, and the employment of modern office technologies.

Responsibilities of the Records Management Officer

Once the Records Management Officer is in place, develop the position criteria, job description, parameters of authority, and begin to define the role of the RMO in the government. The Records Management Officer's basic responsibilities often include the following:

- **Inventorying and Analyzing Records.** The RMO should check storage areas and containers to determine what records exist regardless of physical format (paper, microfilm, tape, disk). The RMO should then record their location, physical condition, age, and content. An analysis of record holdings will indicate which are obsolete and disposable, which are *active* and needed frequently, which are *inactive*, and which have enduring legal, fiscal, administrative, or historical value and must be retained permanently.

- **Conferring with Departments.** The RMO should meet regularly with colleagues and department heads to determine their records management needs. How long does the department or agency need a particular records series to conduct regular business? How often do staff refer to the files for information? Has the office held files longer than the retention period stated in SARA's records retention and disposition schedules, files no longer needed for any purpose? How do officials dispose of out-of-date information? Where should inactive files be stored and when should they be transferred? Working together to answer these questions will help define the records program goals.

- **Serving on the Records Advisory Board.** The RMO should play a prominent role on this Board. Meeting with other Board members when problems arise or when agenda items need review will strengthen the records management program; situations will occur when the RMO needs the Board's advice or support. For example, when considering setting up a records center, the Board can suggest procedures and strategies for gaining broader support to fund the project.

- **Disposing of Unnecessary Records.** The RMO should encourage and coordinate the ongoing legal disposition of obsolete records through the use of SARA's records retention and disposition schedules. These list the legal minimum time periods local government records must be kept. The governing body of the local government must pass a resolution adopting the appropriate schedule. As a legal precaution, the government should maintain a list of records destroyed, including the date and manner of dispósition.

- **Assisting with Retention Schedules Revisions.** Due to the rapidly changing functions of local government, new records are frequently created. Some of these records series may not be covered by SARA's retention and disposition schedules. When this occurs, RMOs should notify the Regional Advisory Officer; they should communicate relevant suggestions and concerns to help SARA update its schedules for local governments.

- **Administering an Inactive Records Program.** Retaining inactive files among those used frequently often hampers administration of local government activity. Having an inactive records storage area will free expensive file cabinets and allow more space for active records. The RMO should locate a clean, secure place for inactive records that have not reached their minimum retention periods, as well as secure, environmentally sound areas for valuable archival records, microfilm, and computer tapes and disks. The RMO should confer with SARA's Regional Advisory Officer, colleagues,

department heads, and the Records Advisory Board when planning this element of the records management program.

- **Establishing an Archival Program.** Archives house permanently valuable records. An archival program's goals are the survival of these records and access to the information they contain. The records often have great research value, containing information on events, people, and significant cultural issues. A records inventory and the SARA schedules help identify archival records. They must be arranged, described, and made accessible to government employees and the general public. At the same time, they must be kept in an environmentally sound area as well as one that is secure. There should be staff to help patrons find materials and to oversee proper handling of the documents. An experienced archivist could be hired to consult on management of the program during its initial set up and provide advice for its future operation.

- **Coordinating Use of Information Management Technology.** The RMO should organize or participate in planning for micrographic and electronic data processing systems. She/he should be involved in discussions of new information management techniques before they are implemented, and pay special attention to the electronic storage and retrieval processes. If several offices are automating, the RMO should help coordinate the effort.

- **Reviewing and Advising on Records-Related Equipment and Supply Requests.** The RMO must carefully analyze requests to confirm the need and cost-effectiveness of these often expensive products. Use of a records center for inactive records storage may allow recycling of filing cabinets rather than purchase of new ones. This underscores the RMO's role as the principal official responsible for information and records management.

- **Informing and Educating.** The RMO should keep colleagues informed about records management techniques and the records management program through workshops, manuals, and other publications. The RMO should promote the program and educate local officials about its benefits to enhance its visibility. In addition, the RMO could develop educational presentations for staff and colleagues, noting relevant publications and workshops offered by professional organizations.

- **Consulting with Other Records Professionals.** The RMO should consult with the Regional Advisory Officer, and other SARA staff as appropriate, about records concerns. SARA staff are familiar with conditions throughout the State, and the agency is legally charged to provide advisory services to all New York local governments except New York City. For additional assistance, the RMO can contact prof ... ional organizations such as the Society of

American Archivists (SAA), the Association of Records Managers and Administrators (ARMA), the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators (NAGARA), the New York Association of Local Government Records Officers (NYALGRO), the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference (MARAC), Capital Area Archivists (CAA), Lake Ontario Archives Conference (LOAC), Archivists Roundtable of Metropolitan New York, and the Long Island Archives Conference (LIAC). Their addresses are available from SARA's Local Government Records Services.

- **Reporting Program Efficiency and Savings.** Whenever possible, the RMO should report the economic advantages provided by the records program to other government officials and the public. The RMO should publicize the program through news releases, annual reports, newsletters, and the news media.

- **Coordinating the Grant Application Process.** The RMO should oversee the development and submission of grant applications to SARA's Local Government Records Management Improvement Fund and other sources of funding. RMOs should secure necessary guidelines and application forms, attend grant application workshops offered by SARA, and work with department heads to draft the application and submit it on time. The RMO should act as project director when appropriate and be closely involved in the project. Applications to the LGRMIF require the RMO's approval and signature.

The Records Advisory Board

Purpose of Having a Records Advisory Board

A local Records Advisory Board not only serves as an advisory committee for the records management program but also provides a number of additional benefits to the records program and the local government:

- Appointment of the Board demonstrates to local government officials and citizens that the government is committed to efficient and cost-effective records management.

- By representing principal offices within a local government, Board members can communicate what they learn to their respective program staffs. The authority of the Board members ensures compliance with records management and archival practices throughout all the agencies of the local government.

- The Board can promote the benefits of a records management program to those officials who allocate needed resources.

Composition of the Board

A strong Records Advisory Board will help organize and more effectively operate a records management program. It is strongly recommended that the Board should include the RMO, the local government's counsel, the fiscal officer, and an administrative officer, preferably the chief executive official or designee, and the local government's historian in counties and municipalities. Other types of local governments should consider appointing the local county or municipal historian as a member of their boards. Appointment of a private citizen who uses local government records may also be desirable. All of these individuals mentioned bring special knowledge, authority, and expertise to the Board and can advise the Records Management Officer on the legal, fiscal, administrative, and historical value of records. The governing body of the local government should appoint Board members through legislation or record appointments in oath books or minutes.

Responsibilities of the Records Advisory Board

Responsibilities of the Records Advisory Board should include, but not be limited to, the following:

- **Supporting and Guiding the Records Management Program.** Support of and guidance for the records management program and the Records Management Officer by the Board are crucial when implementing a records management program, but must continue once the program is in place. The Board should help the Records Management Officer develop and implement policies and procedures, define program goals and objectives, draft position descriptions, and hire staff. It should advise on major decisions concerning records management, such as the establishment of a records center or the implementation of a microfilm program. The Board should become familiar with retention and disposition schedules and learn to identify archival records. Members should provide advice on records management problems or issues. The Board should review program performance regularly and propose improvements. It should also stay informed about LGRMIF projects and all grant applications.

- **Promoting Public Awareness.** The Board should develop ways to focus public interest on local records issues. It should promote public use of records and develop support for the program. In addition, the Board should learn about public relations tools and suggest ways to promote records management to local officials, to communicate to them the significance of historical records and the cost-effectiveness of the program.

- **Reviewing All Requests for the Disposition of Records.** The Board should regularly review requests for the disposition of records that

have passed their retention periods. The local historian can help ensure records with historical value are retained.

For More Information and Assistance

The State Archives and Records Administration provides records management services to local governments including technical advice and assistance, publications, training and presentations, and consultations with local officials concerning records and information management issues. SARA has regional offices throughout the State; each office has an expert records specialist who can visit local governments and provide on-the-spot advice. These services are supported by the Local Government Records Management Improvement Fund. For further information, contact your regional office or:

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